

THE AUK:

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF

ORNITHOLOGY.

VOL. XXVII.

APRIL, 1910.

No. 2.

IN MEMORIAM: JAMES CUSHING MERRILL.

BORN MARCH 26, 1853.—DIED OCTOBER 27, 1902.

BY WILLIAM BREWSTER.

With Portrait (Plate VII).

JAMES CUSHING MERRILL, third of that name in direct descent, was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on March 26, 1853. Both branches of his family were of old New England stock, derived originally from England. His father, who died when he was about fifteen years of age, was a lawyer by profession, as was also his grandfather, Judge Merrill of Boston, who married Ann Saltonstall of Salem. His mother was (or, rather is, for she is still living) Jane (Hammond) Merrill. I first made his acquaintance at a school which we entered together more than half a century ago. He was then a shy, graceful, slenderly-built boy, already interested in Natural History and possessed, if I remember rightly, of a small collection of end-blown birds' eggs and native butterflies. After attending several private schools in Cambridge, and the well-known one then kept by Mr. Dixwell in Boston, he went to Germany where he remained for a year or two, and began the study of medicine. On returning to this country he entered the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania from which he was graduated in 1874. About a year later he received the appointment of Assistant Surgeon in the United States Army. His first assignment was to St. Louis Barracks, Missouri, in 1875. After this he was stationed

successively at the following army posts:—Fort Brown, Texas, from February, 1876, to June, 1878; Fort Shaw, Montana, from May, 1879, to May, 1880; Fort Custer, Montana, from June, 1880, to the autumn of 1883; Columbus Barracks, Ohio, from 1883 to 1886; Fort Klamath, Oregon, from November, 1886, to August, 1887; Watervliet Arsenal, New York, September–October, 1887; Frankford Arsenal, Pennsylvania, October, 1887, to November, 1889; Fort Reno, Oklahoma, November, 1889, to February, 1891; Fort Sherman, Idaho, from October, 1894, to some time early in the year 1897.

The above data, taken mainly from letters and bird skins in my possession, show how very many of his maturer years were spent by Dr. Merrill in wild and remote places. This period may be said, indeed, to have represented the better part of his life, in more senses than one. Throughout it he enjoyed the constant companionship of his devoted mother who shared with him the isolation and privations inseparable from such an experience, and whose intellectual, as well as maternal, pride and sympathy in his professional and scientific work must have added immeasurably to his happiness and comfort. Everywhere he made warm friends among his brother officers and the enlisted men under his care, winning easily their affection and respect by the fidelity with which he performed his professional duties as Post Surgeon. To these he gave — as was fitting — his first allegiance, never allowing anything else to interfere with them. Fortunately they were not ordinarily so onerous as to prevent him from devoting much of his time to other interests, chief among which was the study of natural history. This interest, as we have seen, was not wanting in his early youth. With advancing years it deepened and broadened until it became, next to his profession, the ruling passion of his life. Every branch of zoölogy attracted him, but he gave his attention mainly to ornithology and entomology. Like many another army officer, he was a keen sportsman and a persistent fisherman. Opportunities for indulging all these kindred tastes were not lacking at the frontier posts where he was stationed, and he improved them to the utmost, devoting an especially large share of his leisure time to studying and collecting birds, with their nests and eggs, and insects, particularly beetles. He did not, however, attempt to form a private

collection, but with characteristic generosity gave nearly all his specimens to personal friends and to museums; most of the nests and eggs passing, through Major Bendire's hands, into the National Museum, and of the birds into the collection of the writer of this memoir. Altogether, Dr. Merrill's life on the frontier may be said to have been not less profitably than happily spent. It is a pity that it could not have been continued still longer since it suited him so perfectly in every way.

Although qualified both by nature and by training for dealing with abstruse and difficult problems of science, and by no means without interest in its purely technical side, Dr. Merrill was distinctively a field naturalist. His published ornithological writings relate almost exclusively to the habits and distribution of western birds. They are not numerous, but their quality is of high order, for he was an exceptionally accurate and intelligent observer, as well as a pleasing and finished writer. The earliest, and perhaps also most important one of any length, is that relating to the birds which he found in 1876, 1877, and 1878, in the neighborhood of Fort Brown, Texas. Although this region had been visited in 1863 by a competent British ornithologist, Mr. H. E. Dresser, its wonderfully rich and varied avifauna remained comparatively unnoticed and unknown until attention was called to it by Dr. Merrill. He took there specimens of no less than twelve species and subspecies of birds which, up to that time, had not been ascertained to occur anywhere north of the Mexican boundary; besides many nests and sets of eggs then undescribed or of exceeding rarity.

Other papers, of almost equal value and importance, are his 'Notes on the Birds of Fort Klamath, Oregon,' published in 1883, and his 'Notes on the Birds of Fort Sherman, Idaho,' which appeared in 1897. At Fort Brown he obtained a Goatsucker, at Fort Klamath a Horned Lark, and at Fort Sherman a Song Sparrow, which have been found to represent forms previously unknown to science, and now bear his name.

Although these and others of his ornithological papers are excellent of their kind, no one of them is equal in literary merit to his Memorial of Major Bendire, published in 1898. He not only admired, but loved, the bluff, upright Major — as, indeed, who did not? — and this tribute to the memory of his friend is an altogether admirable piece of work.

Despite his extensive experience with many of the larger mammals of our western plains and mountains, his only papers concerning them of which I have any knowledge are one 'On the Habits of the Rocky Mountain Goat,' published in 1880, and another entitled 'A Silver Tip Family' (of Grizzly Bears), which appeared in 1897.

In a letter written at Fort Custer, on September 5, 1883, Dr. Merrill says: "I have recently received an invitation to the convention of the A. O. U., and greatly regret that it will be impossible for me to be present at that time." This shows that he was among the select few who were asked to help organize our Union; and that, had he not been prevented by military duty from taking the long journey to New York he would have been one of its Founders. As it was, he was elected an Active Member at this meeting, afterwards becoming a Life Member and Fellow. He was one of the earliest members of the Boone and Crocket Club; a Corresponding Member of the Linnæan Society of New York; an Associate Member of the Boston Society of Natural History; a Corresponding Member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club; a Member of the Biological Society of Washington; a Member of the Society of Colonial Wars; an Active Member of the Association of Military Surgeons; a Member of the Washington Academy of Sciences; a Member of the Association of Medical Libraries; a Member of the Cosmos Club of Washington; a Member of the Devil's Island Shooting Club in Currituck Sound; and a Member of the Tourelle Fishing Club in Canada.

Early in February, 1891, to his "intense surprise," as he wrote me at the time, Dr. Merrill was summoned from Fort Reno to the Surgeon General's Office in Washington to take "charge of all medical supplies and medical property of the Army." This employment was novel to his experience and probably not altogether to his taste; but he expressed no dissatisfaction with it, and continued to apply himself to it for upwards of three years. On November 16, 1892, he was married to Mary Pitt Chase of Maryland. On March 13, 1894, he was made a full surgeon in the Army, with the rank of Major. In October of the latter year he was again ordered to a western post, Fort Sherman, Idaho, where, with his wife, and mother, he remained for a little more than two years, revelling once more, as it proved for the last time, in the free out-of-

door life and making a considerable collection of birds. When he returned to Washington, early in 1897, it was to receive the appointment of Librarian at the Surgeon General's Office. Here he spent the brief remainder of his days, performing, with his accustomed steadfastness and ability, tasks perhaps not altogether uncongenial, but obviously irksome to a man of his temperament, and so very arduous and confining, that, by degrees, his health and strength yielded to the strain. Not so his courage, for up to the very last he maintained a brave and serene front; applying himself unremittently to his work whenever his strength permitted, and almost up to the last calming the anxiety of intimate friends by the cheerful assurance that he was not really ill. But by the summer of 1902, his condition had become so obviously serious that he was induced to spend a few weeks at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, in the hope that the rest and change might do him permanent good; they proved of no avail, however, and he died of chronic nephritis in Washington on October 27, 1902.

When in the prime of life, Dr. Merrill was a fine and indeed distinguished-looking man, rather tall and very strongly built, with that erect, military bearing characteristic of army officers the world over. He was an excellent linguist, speaking two foreign languages, French and German, and reading and translating no less than nine others: viz. Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, Swedish and Russian. He had refined yet very simple tastes, quick intelligence, sound judgment, high ideals of honor, manliness and duty, untiring patience and industry. Although fearless, self-reliant and inflexible of purpose, in the discharge of his customary duties, his modesty respecting his general ability and desserts amounted almost to humility, and, no doubt, prevented him from aspiring to tasks and honors which otherwise he might have undertaken and achieved. In speech, as in thought, he was direct and absolutely sincere, yet very kindly, with a gentle courtesy of manner which had an old time flavor to it and was irresistibly winning. No one could meet him, even casually, without being impressed by it and by the obvious fact that it was something different from the affability of a merely well-bred man. Those who knew him intimately recognized that it was but the outward reflection of the dignity, sweetness and purity that lay within. He was so wholly

superior to jealousy, prejudice and worldliness, and to all considerations of selfish policy, that he never seemed to suspect their possible existence in others. Trustful, sympathetic, true of heart, honest of purpose, intensely loyal in his friendships, generous and charitable in his relations with all men, he lived a brave, unselfish and useful life, and at its close met death with perfect fortitude and serenity.

The following list of notes and papers written by Dr. Merrill is probably far from complete but is believed to include nearly if not quite all the titles of his contribution to the literature of Ornithology and Mammalogy.

1. Notes on Texan Birds. *Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, Vol. I, Sept. 1876, pp. 88, 89.
2. A Humming Bird new to the Fauna of the United States. *Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, Vol. II, Jan. 1877, p. 26.
3. Notes on *Molothrus æneus* Wagl. *Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, Vol. II, Oct. 1877, pp. 85-87.
4. Occurrence of the Western Nonpareil and Berlandier's Wren at Fort Brown, Texas. (These records are given over J. A. Allen's signature in the form of a literal quotation from a letter written to him by Dr. Merrill.) *Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, Vol. II, Oct. 1877, pp. 109, 110.
5. Occurrence of *Myiarchus crinitus* var. *erythrocerus*, Sclat., at Fort Brown, Texas. *Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, Vol. III, April, 1878, pp. 99, 100.
6. The Buteo Albi-Caudalis. (Misprint for *albicaudatus*, the note relating to a specimen taken near Fort Brown, Texas). *Forest and Stream*, Vol. X, no. 23, July 11, 1878, p. 443.
7. Notes on the Ornithology of Southern Texas, being a List of Birds observed in the Vicinity of Fort Brown, Texas, from February, 1876, to June, 1878. *Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus.*, Vol. I, 1878, pp. 118-173.
8. Maynard's Birds of Florida [review]. *Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, Vol. IV, April, 1879, pp. 114, 115.
9. On the Habits of the Rocky Mountain Goat [being a literal transcript in full of a letter written by Dr. Merrill to Professor Baird]. *Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus.*, Vol. II, 1880, pp. 283, 284.
10. Notes on the Winter Plumage of *Leucosticte tephrocotis* Sw., and *L. tephrocotis* var. *littoralis* Bd. *Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*. Vol. V, April, 1880, pp. 75-77.
11. Nesting Habits of the Canada Goose (*Bernicla canadensis*). *Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, Vol. VIII, April 1883, pp. 124, 125.
12. Republication in 'The Auk' of Descriptions of New North American Birds — A Suggestion. *Auk*, Vol. II, Oct. 1885, p. 389.

